



Using the “Community Readiness Model” to understand food access

A summary of “Community Readiness: Applying the model to food access in six Northeast communities,” a series of six reports prepared in 2014 by Kristyn Dumont Achilich^a and Dr. Linda Berlin^a for the Enhancing Food Security in the Northeast project.

Nine communities across the Northeast were active partners in the Enhancing Food Security in the Northeast (EFSNE) Project. What did that mean? These urban and rural locations were the loci of resident focus groups and shopper intercept surveys. Each had one or two grocery stores that the research team studied. Community leaders were recruited; they served as liaisons and participated in project events. As part of their active engagement, each locale was invited to conduct “learning community” activities that would build awareness and actions around food access and food systems change.

Objectives

To help support these “learning community” activities the EFSNE team first wanted to find out how ready each community was to move toward enhancing access to food. One thing team members knew for sure: each community was different. A one-size-fits-all approach simply wouldn't work.

Working with Dr. Linda Berlin, an Extension faculty member at the University of Vermont and a member of the EFSNE Project team, graduate student Kristyn Achilich employed the Community Readiness Model (CRM) to assess the project communities. CRM is a theory-based tool developed at Colorado State University to assess how ready a community is to address an issue. It provides a framework for objectively assessing community culture and resources, resulting in a roadmap and appropriate strategies for moving forward. In the case of EFSNE, the goal was to understand how project communities had addressed food access and what actions they might take to increase awareness about and access to food.

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Key Takeaways

- The Community Readiness Model is an effective method to assess communities' capacity to address food access.
- Interviewing at least six people in a community is likely to provide greater breadth of perspectives to understand a community's readiness for change.
- In this research, communities were more likely to be further along in their resources and support for food access, compared to community-wide awareness of the issue.
- Caution is needed when comparing across communities.

Just as individuals progress through stages of change related to personal behaviors, so do communities when issues emerge that are likely to benefit from a community response. The characteristics of a community are essential to understand in order to implement effective community initiatives. (Silwa et al., 2011). CRM has its origins in addressing community alcohol and drug abuse prevention, but the model has the potential to assess readiness for a range of issues from health and nutrition to environment and social concerns (Plested et al., 1998).

The CRM assesses specific characteristics related to different levels of problem awareness and readiness for change. It uses key informant interviews with questions on six different dimensions. The table below summarizes these dimensions through a food access lens. Each of the six dimensions has an operational definition and set of questions. Each is evaluated by nine stages of readiness. Each stage of readiness is distinct and describes particular characteristics that are likely to be present if the community is at that stage of readiness. The readiness scale goes from “no awareness” through “vague awareness,” “pre-planning,” “preparation,” “initiation,” “stabilization,” and “confirmation,” with the final stage being “high level of community ownership.”

The value of the CRM is that the staging process can help a community identify how it might make progress in a logical manner. Knowing where a community falls on this continuum of readiness by

The six CRM dimensions through a food-access lens

- **Knowledge** — Is the community aware of the causes, consequences, and effects of a food-access problem?
- **Climate** — What is the attitude of a community towards food access? Are community members resistant to certain initiatives, or do they embrace them?
- **Efforts** — To what extent are there efforts, programs, and policies that address food access? Are there school gardens, a food policy council, a food shelter? Do farmers markets accept EBT benefits?
- **Community Knowledge of Efforts** — Do community members know about these existing resources, and do they access them?
- **Resources for ongoing efforts** — Are people, time, money, space available to support existing efforts?
- **Leadership** — Are community leaders supportive of the issue?

assessing perceptions of organizational resources, capacity and citizen attitudes can help guide programming efforts aimed at meeting a community where it’s at, by identifying stage-appropriate goals, actions, and expectations.

The study

Achilich adapted a series of prescribed interview questions to specifically address the issue of food access through key informant interviewees in three urban and three rural project communities. She asked 29 questions about existing food access programs, strengths and weaknesses of these programs, how much residents know about food access, how existing programs are funded, and more. Four stakeholders from each of the six sites participated, including food policy council members, food bank personnel and city administrators.

Findings

After two people scored transcripts of stakeholders’ interviews using CRM methodology, Achilich calculated each community’s “stage of readiness.” For the EFNSE project, the stages ranged from no recognition of a need for increased food access, to a high level of community ownership, characterized by detailed and sophisticated knowledge about the prevalence, causes, and consequences of food access issues.

Achilich found that in several communities, the dimensions that measure resources and support for food access programming scored higher than the dimensions that measure awareness of food access issues and of existing efforts to address these issues. “There were more initiatives occurring than people knew about, so the work will be in connecting the dots, connecting people to existing resources,” she explained. “In these cases, our work as a team might be to encourage community activities that focus on connecting people to programming.”

The results showed that urban areas scored higher than rural areas. This was mainly because of the perceived amount of leadership, resources, and efforts directed at the issue. In general, all participating

communities had some measure of active leadership and planning efforts, with modest community support. One challenge was that despite all the media attention paid to food issues, some people are still not receiving the messages. Also, the terms “community” and “food access” are very broad and hard to define.

Each community received their results from the CRM study. One urban community learned that it is engaged at the “initiation” stage of readiness for change. Based on this score, the recommendation was to improve awareness among specific populations and to improve programs to meet specific population and community needs such as more grassroots communications and activities and networking with neighborhood associations and faith communities. The project team was careful not to present the study to the communities in any way that would suggest that the communities were “deficient” or competing with each other. Participants in the CRM interviews said they would like to use the study information to “close the gaps between program goals on paper and practices in the field.” (Achilich, 2014. *Community Readiness: Applying the Model to Food Access in Six Northeast Communities*. P.8.)

According to Achilich, this is the first known application of the CRM to food access and across communities so diverse in their geographies, population size and demographics. She concluded her reporting on this work with several recommendations for future use of the model. For example:

- Increasing the number of respondents from the initial recommendation of 4-6 to perhaps 6-8 representing specific sectors and positions in each community would result in a more robust reflection of the community’s views, culture and understanding.
- Three of the six dimensions have to do with resources, leadership and community efforts—capital the community has already devoted to the issue. In the case of comparing urban and rural settings, urban communities are much more likely to start out with more resources, infrastructure and leadership, resulting in higher scores. So a cross-comparison should acknowledge that caveat.

- Extra care on how results are communicated to (and across) communities is critical to avoid any semblance of judgment and/or comparison. In each EFSNE community, results from other communities were not shared.
- Using a team of researchers (instead of just one individual) helped mitigate potential researcher bias, and improved community engagement by providing results quickly to communities.

Conclusion

Overall, the CRM proved to be a useful method to better understand the state of food access awareness and actions within six Northeast urban and rural communities. Although we used this method to make comparisons across communities, the main purpose of employing the CRM was to identify the stage of readiness in each community to engage in social change activities.

If the tool is being used to compare across communities, it would be ideal to recruit key informants who are in similar roles from one community to the next to improve the chance that perspectives are on par with one another. Regarding the selection of key informants, one shortcoming of the model is the absence of the perspective of someone not directly involved in this work to supplement or reinforce the views of community leaders. Including additional voices is consistent with more recent recommendations on using the CRM that came out after our research began, which state that six-to-eight key informants should be interviewed in each community to help provide a more comprehensive view.

Because the CRM engages community members in a “self” assessment about a community-based topic of interest, it has the potential to stimulate further action within the community, regardless of whether an outside organization is involved and/or an initiative is underway. Thus, providing a report that shares results of the community staging process can be particularly informative and motivating to the community. ❖

References

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About the EFSNE project

The work described here is part of a larger research project called “Enhancing Food Security in the Northeast through Regional Food Systems” (EFSNE). From 2011 to 2017, the EFSNE project engaged more than 40 partners at multiple universities, non-profits and government agencies around the question of whether greater reliance on regionally produced food could improve food access in low-income communities, while also benefiting farmers, food supply chain firms and others in the food system. Learn more at <http://agsci.psu.edu/research/food-security>.

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